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Michigan's Top Brass is 'Colonel Al'

Terwilliger enters Hall of Fame for his contributions

HallOfFame

Michigan's 'Colonel Al'

Al Terwilliger has had a huge effect on harness racing

By Mark Adair

While Al Terwilliger has never trained or driven a state champion, has never won a futurity or cracked the $1 million mark in purse money, he may have had a bigger effect on harness racing than any other person in the world.

"I really didn't think my life would turn out like this," he said. "A half a century ago, I went to the annual MHHA banquet with my father. Little did I realize that my life would have taken this path."

Terwilliger has invented more products and owns more patents on harness racing products than any horseman in the world.

"I'm just trying to protect horses and people," Terwilliger said.

For his contributions to harness racing, Terwilliger was inducted into the Michigan Hall of Fame at the recent MHHA banquet in January.

"My life has been a blessing," Terwilliger said. "To be able to get the enjoyment that I get out of working with people and horses and also get paid for it is truly a blessing."

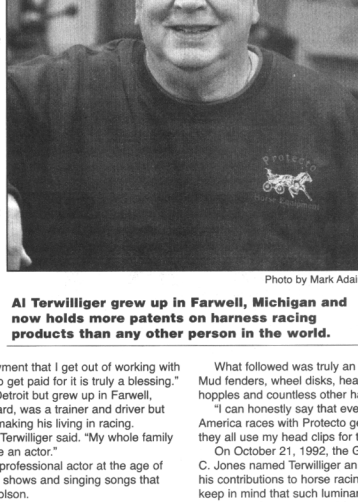

Photo by Mark Adair

Al Terwilliger grew up in Farwell, Michigan and now holds more patents on harness racing products than any other person in the world.

Terwilliger was born in Detroit but grew up in Farwell, Michigan. His father, Durward, was a trainer and driver but Terwilliger did not plan on making his living in racing.

"My dad was in racing," Terwilliger said. "My whole family was in it. But I wanted to be an actor."

He began working as a professional actor at the age of 12, doing traveling minstrel shows and singing songs that were made famous by Al Jolson.

And when Terwilliger was 21 years old, after graduating from The Detroit Conservatory in Music he moved to New York City and enrolled at Juliard College. He later worked as an actor in stage shows, Broadway plays, television shows and movies.

He landed a job as an understudy to Robert Morris, who was starring in *How To Succeed in Business* on Broadway.

"I got paid $750 a week," Terwilliger said. "and I never even got to perform once. Bob was never sick, he never got injured, nothing. I used to ask him to let me get onstage for him just once but he never missed a performance."

But it was his understudy role that led Terwilliger to fame and riches far beyond his dreams.

"While I was sitting around, getting paid to not work, I needed something to do to keep from being bored," he said. "So I would fiddle around with stuff and invent different things."

It was during this period that Terwilliger invented the Protecto vest, a safety vest to be worn by drivers.

"I sold a few of them," Terwilliger said, "I was making money but my big break came when the Harness Association in New England bought a vest for every driver and trainer in their organization."

Later, Terwilliger was given an achievement award by the USTA. Harness racing's national organization credited him with reducing serious injuries to drivers by 40 percent.

What followed was truly an American Dream. He invented Mud fenders, wheel disks, head clips for numbers, bridles, hopples and countless other harness racing essentials.

"I can honestly say that every horse that races in North America races with Protecto gear," Terwilliger said, "because they all use my head clips for the numbers."

On October 21, 1992, the Governor of Kentucky, Brereton C. Jones named Terwilliger an Honorary Kentucky Colonel for his contributions to horse racing. To put this in perspective, keep in mind that such luminaries as Bob Hope and Bing Crosby have also been knighted as Kentucky Colonels.

He now runs Protecto Horse Equipment, a multi-million dollar company, with Myra, his wife of 35 years. "Colonel Al" handles the inventing while Myra handles the marketing.

"I'm not very smart but I am creative," Terwilliger said. "The smartest thing I ever did was marry Myra. She's the one that makes the business work."

He remains astounded at the way his life has unfolded.

"This could only happen in America," he said, "where a farm kid could do the things that I have done in my life."